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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 007619

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: GOJ DETAINS, RELEASES UNLICENSED PREACHERS

REF: AMMAN 6213

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: A GOJ crackdown on unlicensed preachers over the weekend ignited a furious reaction from Jordan's powerful Muslim Brotherhood, which accused the GOJ of kowtowing to U.S. demands and restricting public freedoms. Intervention from the Prime Minister resulted in the release of 11 clerics and a calming of the situation for now. The GOJ's attempt to enforce this controversial law appears to be a response to the King's public directive earlier this summer to minimize extremist sermonizing from Jordan's mosques. However, the reaction and government climb-down illustrates again the difficulties Jordan faces in reconciling its security concerns with the development of political pluralism. We can expect more such confrontations between Islamists and the monarchy. End Summary.

ISLAMISTS BLAME U.S. FOR ARRESTS

2. (U) Jordan's Islamic movement reacted furiously to a crackdown on unlicensed preachers which began the night of September 8. They accused the government of "storming" the homes of 39 Muslim Brotherhood (MB) members who were accused of violating Jordan's long-standing "Sermons and Guidance Act." The law requires all preachers to be licensed by -- and made employees of -- the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs before delivering a sermon or religious lessons. The crackdown resulted in the arrest of 11 preachers throughout Jordan, including two elderly clerics (one of them former Awqaf Minister Ibrahim Zeid Kilani), who were hospitalized after authorities presented the summons at their homes.

3. (U) As news of the arrests -- some carried out in the middle of the night -- spread, the Islamists' leadership cried "foul." The MB issued a statement condemning the GOJ's "authoritarian measures" as illegal and heaped blame on the United States: "We regard such an action as yet another restriction of public freedoms and awareness at a time when Islam is under U.S.-Zionist attack and is their first target." MB Comptroller General Abd al-Majid Dhunaybat accused the government of implementing a U.S. agenda by carrying out such actions. He warned that the GOJ's actions will drive disaffected youth underground. Meanwhile, the MB's political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), announced: "This measure is condemned, illegal, and does not serve the interests of the country," and called on the government to immediately release the detainees.

PM INTERVENTION CALMS SITUATION--FOR NOW

4. (U) Interior Minister Habashneh publicly defended the arrests, saying the preachers were in violation of a long-standing law, and noted that seven had been released on September 11 after signing pledges to comply (the two hospitalized clerics also were expected to sign). However, the pressure mounted on the GOJ after the two remaining detainees (senior MB leaders) refused to sign the agreement. PM Fayez, Awqaf Minister Hilayel, and Interior Minister Habashneh on September 12 met MB and IAF leaders in an attempt to defuse the situation. The two were released after the MB leadership agreed that its members would abide by the licensing law. Stressing the Islamists' commitment to Jordan's security and stability, Dhunaybat said: "The meeting was positive and has an atmosphere of understanding and the case was closed." For his part, Habashneh said the MB leader pledged that in the future its members would not deviate from any of the "constants" of the state; would not "defame" Jordanian foreign relations, Arab rulers, or friendly countries; would steer away from "personal slander and accusations of infidelity," and would adhere to the Sermons and Guidance law.

WHENCE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT?

5. (C) Beyond Islamist circles, reaction to the crackdown was mixed. Noting the hypocrisy of a government that boasts of its commitment to political development (and by extension loosening its restrictions on free speech), the new Jordanian

daily al-Ghad published a harsh political cartoon about the arrests with the caption "Political Development" in its September 12 edition. It depicted a sinister Interior Minister leading three bound and sweating clerics, as he tells them to prepare to experience his own brand of "political development." Writing in government-controlled al-Rai, political analyst Hamadeh Faraneh criticized the Muslim Brotherhood (which the GOJ has coddled for years) for confronting the government on this issue, noting that Islamists like all other citizens are obligated to comply with the laws of the state. He also slammed Dhunbayat's claim that youth will be driven underground, saying the Islamists have to accept responsibility for shaping the perspective of the young people who attend their mosques. Al-Rai's editorial published the same day agreed, and went so far as to say force should be used if necessary to bring the MB in line with Jordan's laws.

COMMENT

16. (C) With recent terrorist events in Iraq, Russia, and Saudi Arabia not far from Jordanian leaders' minds, the move to enforce the law against unlicensed preaching is in line with the King's recent public call on his ministers to better monitor mosque preaching and promote a message of tolerance and moderate Islam (ref). The GOJ understands that extremist religious messages are increasingly well-received among some disaffected sectors of Jordan's society. The crackdown underscores the delicate balancing act Jordan's political system faces in maintaining security and advocating true political development. Ironically, the mosque sermons pose the lesser of two evils. Generally tight controls on mosques has pushed the most radical preachers, including the Salafists, out of that monitored setting and into living rooms and informal venues, where far more dangerous messages are disseminated, and circles formed which are harder to penetrate.

17. (C) Comment continued: This episode also exposes a rift between the government and Islamists, who for decades were cultivated by the monarchy as a bulwark against radical Arab nationalist ideologies. With radical secular ideologies all but exhausted, and the King pushing the country on a globalist, integrated path, the Islamists are left as the only voice of opposition. We can expect to see many more such clashes as this process plays out, although "mainstream" Islamist forces, such as the MB, can be expected to comply with regime redlines when pressed to do so -- even at the cost of their own credibility. End Comment.

18. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.
HALE